

Bangladesh Hearing - Opening Remarks of Felice D. Gaer

Bangladesh: Religious Freedom,
Extremism, and Security

in the Upcoming National Elections

Thursday, December 4, 2008

Opening Remarks - Felice D. Gaer, Chair

It is my pleasure to welcome you to today's hearing, the third the Commission has conducted on Bangladesh. The first, held in New York in 2004, focused on governance and minority rights; the second was in 2006, focused on the need for fair, violence-free elections that have been postponed for nearly two years and are now scheduled for December 29. The Commission had also traveled to Bangladesh earlier that year.

There are few functioning, moderate democracies in the Muslim world, and the Commission is concerned about Bangladesh's potential to re-join the ranks of those states, after nearly two years of suspended democracy and rule under a military-backed caretaker government. The Commission has longstanding concerns for religious freedom, which are of course intertwined with other rights guarantees that are essential for its realization, such as freedom of expression and assembly and the rule of law.

I should point out that this hearing is one of a series the Commission is convening that focuses on extremism and the repression of religious freedom. We had a hearing on Sudan in September and are planning more on this theme.

Our discussion today presents a timely and important opportunity to focus on Bangladesh's efforts to hold an election that is free, fair, and peaceful in spite of the threats of religious militancy, chronic political violence, and growing intolerance toward religious minorities and toward those within the majority community who hold differing views about Islam and the role of Islam in Bangladeshi society.

Bangladesh represents a risk of conflict but also an opportunity to establish civilian, representative government on a firmer footing. Which it will be depends on how the government-and the political parties-manage the upcoming elections.

One of the themes of this hearing is the threat posed to democracy and human rights by extremism, particularly extremism in the name of religion. Thus, I also wish to take this opportunity to offer my personal condolences and those of my fellow Commissioners to all the people of India and to the families of the victims of the latest atrocity perpetrated by extremists in South Asia. These were the horrific terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

Bangladeshis from all major religious communities have also suffered in the past at the hands of extremists falsely claiming religious justification for their crimes.

On a more positive note, I should also point out that Bangladesh has developed democratic institutions, an independent judiciary, and a lively civil society with active human rights groups. The country also has significant ties to the United States, including a significant USAID program that invests in democracy and governance.

Unfortunately, however, Bangladesh's democratic experience has been marred by high levels of political violence. When in opposition, both major parties have turned to parliamentary boycotts, general strikes, and streets protests with a high potential for violence.

As we discussed in detail in our hearings in 2004 in New York, following the elections of 2001 in

which political Islamic groups played an important role in ensuring a victory by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (or "BNP" for short), there were numerous reports of killings, sexual assaults, illegal land seizures, arson, extortion, and intimidation of members of religious minorities, particularly of Hindus. Many ascribed these attacks to partisans of the BNP and its so-called "Islamist" allies. Thousands of Bangladeshi Hindus reportedly fled to India to escape persecution. Although reports of anti-minority violence have dropped off sharply since 2001, minority representatives continue to express concerns about their future in Bangladesh, citing a growth in extremism and intolerance in the majority Muslim community. Others also point to this growth, including the Congressional Research Service, Amnesty International and other NGOs, and U.S. Ambassador William Milam and Ambassador Tariq Kareem of Bangladesh, both of whom testified at our last hearing.

Islamist militants

were blamed by the authorities for a coordinated wave of bomb explosions on August 17, 2005. Militants were also implicated in a series of bomb attacks on courts or individual judges in October-November, 2005. The bomb attacks were accompanied by calls by the militants for the substitution of sharia for Bangladesh's current secular legal system. Other militants have campaigned openly to have the government designate members of the Ahmadi religious community as "non-Muslims," opening the door to official discrimination and persecution.

Bangladesh's current

caretaker government was installed with military backing in January 2007, after the postponement of elections and the imposition of a state of emergency. Under the mandate of an anti-corruption campaign, thousands have been arrested, including senior political leaders, political activists, businessmen, journalists, and academics.

Despite the

caretaker government's public promises to uphold human rights, serious human rights abuses have been reported, including suspected killings by the security forces, arbitrary detentions, curbs on press freedom, and violations of the right of due process, particularly in the context of the anti-corruption campaign.

The prominent role

of the military as the principal backer of the current extra-constitutional administration and the severe restrictions placed by the state of emergency on normal political activities all raise questions about the fairness of elections now scheduled for December 29.

To help us sort out

the issues, we have assembled three panels of distinguished expert witnesses.

First, we are honored to have the U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh, James Moriarty, who will address U.S. efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Bangladesh, as well as U.S. strategic interests in Bangladesh.

Second, Peter Manikas and Kimber Shearer, representatives of the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, respectively, will discuss their election monitoring and other long-term governance projects.

Our last panel consists of the following distinguished experts on human rights and governance issues in Bangladesh:

- Dr. Ali Riaz, Chair and Associate Professor of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, and author of numerous publications on Islamist militancy and political Islam in Bangladesh;

- Dr. Shapan Adnan, Associate Professor in South Asia Studies at National University of Singapore, and an expert on ethnic and religious conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts;

- Asif Saleh, Executive Director and founder of Drishtipat, a human rights organization whose Writer's Collective provides frequent media commentary in Bangladesh and abroad; and

- Dr. Sachi Dastidar, Professor of Politics & Economics at the State University of New York-Old Westbury, and expert on the position of religious minorities in Bangladesh, particularly Hindus.

- Unfortunately, the noted human rights attorney Sara Hossain is unable to join us today because of an urgent development in a court case in Dhaka. We hope to have her written comments for the record available soon on our Web site. Ms. Hossain did request distribution of copies of Ain- O - Salish Kendro's 2007 chapter on religious freedom-that chapter is available outside, along with copies of the other witnesses' testimony. All documents will also be available on our Web site after the hearing.

